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**Exploring the Relationship Between Ethical Leadership Skills
and Employee Trust in the Workplace**

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1. Introduction

1.1. Background

At present, ethical leadership happens to be one of the many critical determinants toward leading an organization successfully in a working environment irrespective of the nature and size of any business but more critically within retail organizations marked by large and diversified workforces, high employee turnovers, and intensive customer interactions (Northouse, 2021). Therefore, through integrity and fairness with transparency and consideration for other people manifested behaviourally to set a standard mode of conduct among employees that they can emulate (Brown & Treviño, 2020). Leaders at all levels-even store managers or department supervisors-have played an instrumental role either positively developing corporate cultures oriented on ethics or ensuring that workplaces are respectful, supportive, and caring (Ciulla, 2020).

At the same time, employee trust has also emerged as a burning issue in organisational behaviour literature. Trust is a psychological state comprising the intention to accept vulnerability based on positive expectations of another's intentions and behaviour (Mayer et al., 1995; Robbins and Judge, 2019). In organisations, especially retail firms where staff teams are often decentralised with heavy reliance on supervisory guidance and where members continuously face ethical dilemmas relating to customer service, sales targets and organisational policies, the role of trust cannot be overemphasised. Meanwhile, ethical leadership could practically channel building employee trust into reducing turnover and increasing engagement added with improved organisational reputation (Hassan et al., 2022).

The highly intensified need for ethical leadership practices across industries is driven by recent high-profile scandals and increasing public scrutiny together with the global wave towards corporate social responsibility (Maak et al., 2021). More specifically, in retail: supply chains are complex; there is a huge pressure on costs; decisions have to be made quickly- hence an environment ripe with ethical tensions which test the credibility of leaders (Sison et al., 2018). In such situations, hence ethical leadership forms a strategic necessity apart from being just a moral imperative to establish trust and retain employees and maintain brand integrity.

1.2. Research Aim

This research will deeply analyse the conduct of the relationship between ethical leadership skills and employee trust at workplaces in the retail sector through secondary sources,

reviewing available theories, models, and empirical results on the topic. Therefore, this study aims to determine the process by which trust is built through ethical leadership behaviour and key leadership skills that foster trust and build an analysis for managerial practice in retail organizations.

1.3. Research Objectives

The study will address the following objectives:

- To provide an overview of ethical leadership and its main components in retail organisations
- To discuss employee trust and its dimensions relevant to the dynamics of retail workplaces
- To review existing literature on the relationship between ethical leadership skills and employee trust with support from case studies
- To highlight issues of ethical leadership for employee retention and engagement with organisational performance in a retail environment.

1.4. Research Questions

The study will address the following research questions:

What constitutes ethical leadership in the retail workplace?

How is employee trust conceptualised and developed within retail organisations?

What is the relationship between ethical leadership skills and the development of employee trust?

Which ethical leadership practices are most effective in fostering employee trust in retail contexts?

What are the organisational outcomes associated with strong ethical leadership and employee trust in the retail sector?

1.5. Rationale

The significance of this paper lies in both academic and practical dimensions. From an academic perspective, a large body of literature discusses the concepts of ethical leadership and trust separately; scant integrated analysis focuses on the retail sector with its particular organisational structures and workforce characteristics that shape the dynamics of leadership and trust (Sison et al., 2018; Maak et al., 2021). More specifically, retail organisations continuously face issues regarding employee retention, engagement, and adherence to ethics. This research

will hence practically benefit HR policymakers by studying the relationship between ethical leadership and trust among employees as it can shed light on relevant aspects of leadership training programs that eventually improve performance at different workplaces.

Also, the rise of responsible governance in sustainability and stakeholder expectations on corporate accountability drive the urgency of this research. If retail managers understand how ethical leadership harnesses trust and sustaining it gives them a pathway approach to navigate through complicated ethical issues and also inspires loyalty, motivation, and productivity from employees.

2. Literature Review

The relationship between ethical leadership and trust has featured predominantly within the organisational behaviour and leadership literature with a preponderance of analysis from corporate and public sector environments. Ethical leadership is normally defined as displaying normatively appropriate behaviour through personal actions and relationships (Brown and Treviño 2020). In their explanation, ethical leaders set out to make explicit their standards by example of their own conduct reinforcing acceptable behaviour through rewards or penalties for misconduct (Ethical Leadership Theory: Northouse 2021). However, employees are mostly working remotely in teams dealing with complex customer interactions where team leaders play an instrumental role in setting behavioural norms that develop trust-based relationships at Retail stores.

Trust is defined as a psychological state comprising the intention to accept vulnerability and positive expectations regarding the intentions and actions of another person (Mayer et al., 1995; Robbins & Judge, 2019). In organisations, leadership trust becomes an imperative precursor to cooperation, commitment and engagement (Dirks and Ferrin, 2002). The relationship between ethical leadership and trust has been reported by many researchers because such acts inform integrity, fairness and concern for employees' well-being (Hassan et al., 2022). Leaders acting in a perceived honest and principled manner will most likely inspire employees to attribute positive intentions toward their decisions and accept the organisational goals as legitimate (Brown and Treviño, 2020; Ciulla, 2020).

Ethical leadership theory highlights two primary mechanisms by which leaders foster trust: social learning and social exchange. Bandura's (1977) social learning theory holds that employees observe and imitate the behaviour of their leaders. Leaders signal appropriate behaviour through the display of acting as ethical role models, which subsequently builds trust

through perceived consistency between words and actions (Northouse, 2021). The other mechanism proposed by social exchange theory is that when leaders deal fairly with employees and display integrity, they reciprocate with trust, loyalty, and performance (Blau, 1964; Robbins and Judge 2019). Therefore, both mechanisms are highly applicable within retail contexts where leadership influence is often peripherally applied through policy, supervisory behaviour,

Empirical research on the positive relationship between ethical leadership and trust has long been supported. Most recently, Hassan et al. (2022) found in their work that behaviours of ethical leadership significantly predict employee trust towards supervisors and, thus, also towards organisational commitment; they further found this to act as a mediating variable for both relationships. Kalshoven et al. (2016) found that it increased with decreasing counterproductive behaviour apparent within management-employee relations; therefore, transparency-consistency-accountability skills form antecedents of trustful relationships.

Yet, there are unique elements in the retail sector that shape this relationship. Large numbers of part-time and temporary employees are typically carried on the payrolls of most retail organizations within a widely dispersed geographic area. Organizational policies are implemented through first-line supervisors and store managers (Bratton and Gold, 2017). This creates what Maak et al. (2021) describe as a leadership gap between corporate ethical values and day-to-day managerial practice. For example, even if top management is truly committed to acting ethically, store-level managers who must deliver on sales targets may simply pay lip service to such commitments and place short-term performance ahead of ethics under pressure; hence they violate trust reposed in them by employees.

Ethical leadership is influenced by cultural and contextual factors. According to Hofstede's theory of cultural dimensions, behaviours are interpreted through cultural lenses (Hofstede et al., 2010). In multinational retail firms, employees of different backgrounds view the behaviour of a leader enacted ethically in different ways. For example, actions perceived as transparent and fair in one culture may be viewed with suspicion in another. Retail ethical leadership requires such sensitivity and ability to work across different value systems (Sison et al., 2018). The high-intensity performance pressure and high employee turnover typical of the retail sector make trust even harder to build but doubly important for stability and morale (Ciulla, 2020; Northouse, 2021).

Recent works have linked the concept of ethical leadership to employee well-being, engagement, and organisational citizenship behaviours thus expanding the understanding of ethical leadership. Maak et al. (2021) found that ethical leadership creates a climate of psychological safety between employees and makes it possible for trust to thrive between employees and leaders. Trust is further strengthened when leaders communicate openly, admit

mistakes, and involve employees in decision making. Unethical or inconsistent leadership behaviour erodes trust, not only resulting cynicism but also in various forms of withdrawal behaviour and eventually turnover (Robbins and Judge, 2019). This is specifically relevant in retail where frontline employees are mostly the face of the brand.

Large gaps still exist in the literature, first noted is that much of the research was carried out in sectors such as healthcare, education, and corporate services among others with scant attention paid to retail leadership (Hassan et al., 2022). Also, while a positive relationship between ethical leadership and trust has been well established less attention has been accorded to specific skills of leaders (e.g., moral reasoning, communication, conflict resolution) that develop trust in a fast decision retail environment and a highly dispersed operation environment (Brown and Treviño 2020). Another gap noticed is the scanty research on how organizational structures and incentives in the retail sector mediate this relationship-for instance, whether sales targets or reward systems support or undermine practices of ethical leadership.

This research will fill the above gaps through a secondary synthesis of literature analysing the relationship between ethical leadership and trust of employees in the retail sector. Therefore, based on already existing theoretical frameworks and empirical findings, it shall determine key ethical leadership skills specific to retail, further exploring how these skills contribute to trust-building processes in a sector that is confronted with specific ethical and organisational challenges.

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study utilizes secondary qualitative research in exploring how ethical leadership skills relate to trust by employees within the retail sector. Secondary research shall be defined as an approach that systematically collects, reviews, and synthesizes existing data and literature instead of directly gathering primary data from respondents (participants) (Saunders et al., 2019). This makes this mode of inquiry appropriate since much academic work, books, reports from organizations dealing with either ethical leadership or trust comprise both issues whereby intensive analysis can be conducted without necessarily involving new empirical data.

The research is exploratory and analytical. Exploratory research seeks to find relationships and patterns within existing knowledge, while analytical research critically examines theories and evidence to determine connections, gaps, and implications (Bryman, 2016). This

design suits the complex and dynamic nature of ethical leadership and trust, moderated at various levels by culture, organisation, and the individual. Through a literature synthesis, this research develops a logical understanding of the influence of ethical leadership skills on trust in retail workplaces and makes recommendations on areas that future empirical work should investigate.

3.2. Data Collection

The data will be collected only from secondary sources. These will include academic books between the years 2016 to 2024 on leadership, ethics, trust and organisational behaviour, peer-reviewed journal articles available through databases such as EBSCOhost, Google Scholar and ScienceDirect, industry reports and professional publications relevant to leadership and employment practices in the retail sector.

Sources will be selected based on credibility, recency, and relevance to the objectives of this study. Preference will include peer-reviewed journals and books from known academic publishers. Keywords to be used in the search include “ethical leadership”, “employee trust”, “retail sector”, “leadership ethics”, and “trust in organisations”. The process of data collection will involve sourcing, screening, and reviewing relevant materials to summarise main arguments, results, and theoretical standpoints that answer the research questions.

3.3. Data Analysis

Thematic analysis will be defined as the method used to identify, organize and interpret patterns or themes in qualitative data (Braun and Clarke, 2019). This will involve familiarizing oneself with the data by reading and making notes on selected sources; then coding, and searching for themes within the codes. Further steps involve classifying initial codes into categories of behaviours, trust-building mechanisms, and contextual factors reflected through broader codes of leadership behaviour for example further classification and specification of themes.

Synthesis of the findings into a narrative that addresses the research questions, highlighting theoretical and practical implications.

This method makes provision for an analysis structured in detail but flexible to accommodate various and diverse secondary data, thus making possible the integration of theoretical perspectives with empirical evidence. It enables a critical analysis by explicitly pointing out areas of consensus, contestation, and gaps within the literature.

3.4. Limitations

Secondary research involves several limitations. First, this study depends on existing literature which may not wholly accommodate emerging or highly specific contextual dynamics within the retail sector (Saunders et al., 2019). Possible available information reflects earlier inquiry biases such as a heavy geographic concentration-for instance, work based on North America or Europe-and differences by sector. Further, in the total absence of primary data it shall not be possible to empirically test any hypotheses or generate new, very organization-specific information within the retail domain. In addition, since secondary thematic analysis depends on the quality and extent coverage of existing studies, hence where there are gaps or inconsistencies in literature, it automatically translates into less comprehensive findings. Interpretation is also finally subject to researcher bias in source selection and synthesis.

3.5. Ethical Considerations

This study does not involve primary data collection or direct engagement with respondents, but ethical considerations are observed. All secondary sources will be duly cited and referenced using the Harvard referencing system to maintain academic integrity and to avoid plagiarism (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). The data has been collected from publicly available legitimate academic and professional sources only, hence observing intellectual property rights. Besides, the analysis is made in an objective and transparent manner that does not misrepresent any authors' original work in unveiling findings fairly. Ethical leadership is a core theme of this study; therefore, high ethical standards in research conduct are aligned with the content and purpose of the investigation.

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